

MASALA *and* MURDER

PATRICK LYONS



NIYOGI
BOOKS

Published by

NIYOGI BOOKS

Block D, Building No. 77,
Okhla Industrial Area, Phase-I,
New Delhi-110 020, INDIA
Tel: 91-11-26816301, 26818960
Email: niyogibooks@gmail.com
Website: www.niyogibooksindia.com

Text © Patrick Lyons

Editor: Arkaprabha Biswas
Design: Shashi Bhushan Prasad
Cover design: Misha Oberoi

ISBN: 978-93-91125-15-8

Publication: 2021

This is a work of fiction. The names, characters and incidents portrayed in it are the work of the author's imagination. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, events or localities, is entirely coincidental.

All rights are reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical, including photocopying, recording or by any information storage and retrieval system without prior written permission and consent of the Publisher.

Printed at: Niyogi Offset Pvt. Ltd., New Delhi, India

*To Malcolm and Ilka,
for the ball curry and coconut rice,
and to Olivia,
who really spiced things up.*

PROLOGUE

The crew had assembled at the red sandy base of Uluru shortly after sunrise, fronting a growing queue of tourists eager to scale the famous rock before the ban on climbing was imposed. Animated chatter, trilling of different languages grated against the silent still of the land. In the middle distance, a mob of kangaroos lazed in the long shadows cast from an outcrop of stubby bush, as if anticipating the heat to come.

She peered upwards through a squint, shading her eyes from the reflective brilliance of the rockface and grimaced at the steepness of the climb. A steel chain had been erected to help people with the first part of the ascent, though it didn't make climbing any more appealing. The last thing she wanted was to undergo any unnecessary physical exertion; she hadn't felt well again this morning.

It wasn't just the nausea this time, it was something more. Just a feeling, like an animal sensing a predatory ambush. Every now and then she would catch her breath, snap her head around and check behind her. There was never anything there, yet her spine would tingle and the hairs on

the back of her neck would stand. The sensation lasted a few seconds, leaving her tense and uneasy. Her heart playing a wild rhythm.

Subhani Mehta, Bollywood's darling, tied her wavy black hair into a ponytail that reached down past her shoulder blades. She glanced back up at the steep embankment, took a deep breath and sighed. Several of the film crew surreptitiously watched as her T-shirt swelled when she inhaled. She was very watchable. Her 5/8' frame was perfectly proportioned, except for her perky breasts and large, teasing eyes. God had been generous to Subhani with these attributes. Some critics argued that she won the Filmfare Award for Best Actress, the Indian version of the Oscars, purely because of these assets. Subhani didn't give a damn what they thought, or most other people for that matter. Bracing herself with her right foot, she hoisted herself up and commenced the arduous climb.

An hour later she was sitting in a fold-out chair at the summit, holding a parasol against the sun and waiting impatiently while the film crew set up. Occasionally, she would stand up and glance around, squinting against the blinding horizon. Searching, scanning for what she didn't know. Instinctively, her hand would move towards the pendant around her neck.

When it was time, Subhani crawled into a small nylon tent that was set up as a make-do change room, but acted more like a hothouse. She emerged resplendent in a golden sequined sari with a matching midriff-length choli. A large costume diamond covered her navel. On each hand a

collection of bangles jangled with her every single movement.

The film was much like all the other films she had been in—a romantic, action, musical, comedy drama. Elvis would've been proud. This time the film was set in Australia to capitalise on Australia's growing taste for Bollywood's 'Masala Movies'. This was the last scene, a dance sequence set on top of Uluru. She thought it a stupid idea to film up here, where they could only bring what they could carry, but the director called the shots. For now, anyway. She would make sure the imbecile wouldn't work again.

What was supposed to be a quick session had now stretched into mid-morning as the director made them repeat the scene over and over again, each time adjusting the location of the cameras or waiting for a break in the conga-line of climbers so that they would not appear in the background. Subhani wasn't used to being treated like this, being made to wait between takes in the heat like some common *chokri* from the slums. She strummed her fingers impatiently on the arm of her chair and rehearsed the ultimatum she would give to the film's producer. By now, the silk sari stuck to her back with sweat.

Finally, the director called them to attention again. This would be the eighth take and hopefully the last. The background dancers took their positions in a crescent around Subhani. The sequence was relatively simple, a fusion of traditional poses and modern funky dance moves that would end with Subhani crouching on the ground, and the background dancers folding in around her, like a

flower closing up for the night. The speakers on the small stereo crackled as the high-pitched recorded music began to play. The full soundtrack would be dubbed in during post-production.

‘Rolling’, called the director, and pointed to the performers. They moved in unison.

The sequence was going well and Subhani’s last move was to crouch down. It was then that she felt it. Her heart started to pound uncontrollably, painfully, wrenching itself against her ribcage, as if trying to escape. Wide eyed, she gasped for air, but her lungs refused to be filled. Her mind raced with adrenaline-fuelled panic. Instinct commanded her to flee, an instruction her body couldn’t obey as her legs buckled beneath her. She gave a final, hollow scream, grasping for the pendant around her neck as she fell. Her sari folded in on itself as she crumbled to the ground, her bangles rattling as she hit the rock.



CHAPTER 1

It was my second death threat this year. Any more, and it could become a habit. I played the message again.

‘You’re gonna die, you bastard. You tried to take us down, now we gonna take you down. We know where you live.’

The voice was young, a strong Indian accent. He sounded agitated and nervous, racing to get the words out, making his pitch higher than what it might normally be.

‘So, what do you think?’ I asked Bec.

‘Well, it sounds kinda serious. They know who you are and they’ve got your mobile number. I wouldn’t be surprised if they really do know where you live.’ Senior Sergeant Rebecca McAdam never beats around the bush, even when she is off-duty.

‘If I were you, I’d stay away from that shack you call a home for a little while,’ she said with a tone that meant she was only half joking. Bec leaned forward and placed her empty glass on the coffee table between us. She sat back and folded her legs up beside her on the couch, forcing her skirt to ride high on her thigh. I tried not to look but stole a glance anyway.

We’d graduated from the Victorian Police Academy at Glen Waverley together. Twenty-two and naive, proud to

wear the blue uniform. Fifteen years on she was still enjoying the job, the uniform. I had lasted only six before going private, though not by my own choice.

‘You think so?’ I asked sceptically as I topped her glass with more wine.

Bec reached for her refilled glass, gasped in mock horror at the generosity of my pour. She held it up and peered through it, distorting her face from my perspective.

‘I know what you’re trying to do, Sam Ryder, and you’re not going to get me drunk.’ Her left index finger wagged at me slowly, playfully.

I put on my ‘*who, me?*’ face, the same expression a child wears when caught red-handed doing something wrong. I was just as convincing.

‘Yes, you can stay here tonight.’ The finger stopped wagging and pointed to where I was sitting, ‘On that couch!’

We shared a laugh. I had spent the occasional night here before, but never on the couch.

‘Seriously though, do you want us to do anything about this?’ She asked, after taking a long sip. There was a subtle change in her tone, a hint of concern.

I knew exactly who had left the message. ‘No, it’s just a gang of kids I pissed off during the last job. They’ll cool off soon enough. But thanks, Bec, I will stay here tonight,’ I said.

‘You’re welcome. After all, I wouldn’t want them to smash that pretty-boy face of yours.’ Now she was taking the piss. On the force my nickname had been ‘Brasco’ because someone had remarked that I looked like a brown version

of Johnny Depp in the film *Donny Brasco*. I didn't mind the ribbing. It meant I was accepted as part of the group and, privately, I liked the comparison. We shared the same dark hair and eyes, high cheekbones and boyish smile, although I figured I was a little taller and bigger across the shoulders. I'd never been named as the 'Sexiest Man of the Year', however, so I guess Depp could rest easy.

Back then my partner was a guy called Brian McCann, a rottweiler red-head whose bite was definitely worse than his bark. Naturally, people called him 'Bluey'. Brasco and Bluey. Not quite Starsky and Hutch.

We worked well together, shared the same thinking. It helped us react quickly when trouble happened. In hindsight, perhaps we were too much alike? Both 'act now and suffer the consequences later' type of guys. Who knows, if we'd acted differently that day I may still be in the force? I'd wondered about that often over the years. Not that I regretted my actions, just the effect they had on my bank balance.

Since then I'd learned to be more circumspect, more cautious. *You have to be in my kind of work*. No partners, no backup. Although every now and then I regressed. A not-so-old dog with old habits. That's probably why I got the death threats.

The bottle had a few dregs, which I drained into my glass.

'Shall I open another?' I asked, holding up the empty one.

Bec downed her nearly full glass in one action, the trait of a long-serving police officer, and waved the empty glass in front of me.

‘Splishy-splashy,’ she said.

I woke up the following morning feeling a little woolly, looked across at Bec and remembered the first time I saw that little mole on her back, the sheet only covering her from the waist down. I traced my finger down the curve of her spine. She gave a small groan—hangover head—and turned towards me. Her long brown hair fanned out over the pillow and her green eyes took a little while to focus on me. In the morning light her face was soft, kind. Not the poker face she put on with her uniform. I liked her face, a lot. It was her eyes and her smile. They held a mischievous lustre. When she looked at me through the corners of her eyes, she was sexy. When she laughed, it was electric.

I missed mornings like this. That first moment waking next to someone that you care for, the bed warmed by two bodies. I moved closer and kissed her shoulder, then drew even closer and kissed her neck, then her cheek. Bec stroked my face, gently, like I was a puppy, then said the three magic words.

‘Make me coffee.’

Bec’s flat was just off Church Street, in the trendy part of Richmond. Once a hovel, where if the gangs didn’t kill you the cholera would, Richmond was now the place to be seen pouting into your café latte. Occasionally, we would play ‘spot the celebrity’ and watch Melbourne’s beautiful people

prance between the apparel shops that lined the strip. I lived in the back streets of Collingwood, about 3 kilometres from Bec's flat. It wasn't quite as nouveau-riche as Richmond, but lately some parts of Collingwood had scrubbed up nicely. My part was still sleeping it off.

I arrived home about an hour later, freshly showered but in yesterday's clothes. My house looked the same as all the others down the street: a narrow, single-fronted weatherboard built before the First World War. Off-white paintwork with highlights of inner-city grime, a faded green tin roof pockmarked with rust. The house needed work when I bought it and needed much more now. It leaned a little to the left, much like me. In winter it would huddle up to itself so tightly, the front door would jam. In summer it would relax and sag, like a fat man undoing his belt.

There was no post in the letterbox, which was good. The only snail mail that arrived were bills and bank statements. One demanding amounts of money that the other informed I didn't have. I opened the front door and adjusted my eyes to the gloom of the windowless hallway that ran the length of the house. A blinking red light at the end of the passage grabbed my attention, like a lighthouse in the night. The landline was supposed to add a more professional and formal feel to my business than just a mobile. The flashing light meant it had been rung at least twice, with two messages waiting. Hopefully, there would be some work. My last case finished a couple of days ago and there was nothing else on

the horizon. I walked down the hallway, pressed the button marked 'Messages'.

The first message was from a Vivienne Fredricks—a polite, efficient message. She left a phone number and asked me to call her back. The second message came from a familiar voice.

'We know who you are. You're a dead man.'

A chill crept down my spine. If they had my landline number then they definitely had my address. My first thought was to call Bec, in her official capacity. Then I thought again and figured I could handle it myself; give them a couple of days to settle down. Instead, I called Vivienne Fredricks.



CHAPTER 2

As usual for the morning rush, all six lanes of Punt Road connecting the north and south of Melbourne were choked and it took me an hour to travel the 7 kilometres from Collingwood to Saint Kilda, start-stop all the way. I hadn't been bayside for a while, there was no real reason to unless work brought me here. The beachside suburb's popularity had ebbed and flowed over the years, depending on which industry was in vogue; a constant churning between overpriced restaurants and oversexed nightclubs, on the one hand, and the underworld of drugs and prostitution on the other. I took a right onto Fitzroy Street, which led towards the bay. Ahead I saw a man who staggered towards my direction along the footpath, his bare feet filthy. He wore a faded blue T-shirt and an expression that seemed both confused and angry. I kept my eye on him as I drove by, hoping he wouldn't stumble onto the street in front of me. I figured the tide must be out.

Vivienne Fredricks lived in a two-storey Tudor-style house with a view over the bay. I parked my Toyota behind the BMW convertible in the driveway. I was right to wear a suit, even if it was in need of urgent dry cleaning and shined my shoes against the backs of my trousers before walking to the front door.